

**“Aspect of Ethnic Interaction and Integration in Gondar: The Case of the Qemant(c. early 14th century–first decade of 21st century”¹)****Dessalegn Bizuneh**

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Abstract

For several centuries, ethnic interaction and integration have been common features in Ethiopia and the Horn, like in the rest of the world. Consequently, various ethnic groups have been wholly or partly integrated into the dominant group around them. The people of Qemant, who now live in the Chilga and Kerker areas of North Gondar Zone of the Amhara National Regional State in Ethiopia, are among these ethnic groups, who, after more than seven centuries of interaction with their Christian-Amhara neighbors and the state, have become almost entirely integrated. This study, therefore, seeks to show how this integration has come about in a gradual, but steady interaction. It reconstructs the history of Qemant interaction and integration from the early 14th century, the time when the Qemant came into firsthand contact with the Solomonic state, up to the 2007 national census which excluded the Qemant from the list of ethnic groups of the country and triggered a movement that demanded recognition and self-administration for them. The study uses a wide variety of literature: books, theses, dissertations, traveler and missionary accounts, articles, and census reports. Oral traditions are also major corpuses of substantiating the study. Qualitative research method has been employed to analyze and synthesize the information gathered from these sources. The study revealed that through centuries of continuous and complex interaction with the state and larger units of societies around them, the Qemant survival, as a distinct identity, has now come under serious challenge in and around Gondar.

Keywords: Ethnic interaction, integration, Qemant, Solomonic state

Introduction

The Qemant (also spelled as Kimant, Kemant or Kamant) live mainly in Kerker (Lay Armachiho) and Chilga Woredas. They also live in the adjacent woredas of North Gondar Zone, all in the Amhara National Regional State. These people have been among the least studied groups in Ethiopia. The literature mentioning them are very little (Donald Donham: 1986, 3). Only few references by European travelers, missionaries, and certain studies by anthropologists and linguists entail about these people. Recent influx of ethnic-bound writers, have little evidence to up to-date exhaustively concerning the Qemant diachronically. Even most of the aforementioned works have studied the Qemant in relation to the Bete Israel and Amhara. The Qemant have not been studied separately and comprehensively in their own rights.

Pertaining to historical reference on nomenclature, Quirin argues that the name ‘Qemant’ was not found in written sources before the eighteenth century (Quirin: 1992, 32), which makes their remote past much more obscure than one might think. He further states that

¹The reason why I chose first decade of 21st century for the end of the story in this paper is just to take the last national census carried out in 2007 in the country as a landmark. It is since then the Qemant case has become such a hot issue in the region and the zone in particular that it troubled the long-standing peaceful coexistence of peoples. Today, the Qemant have received a nationality status after decades of protracted struggle in a much controversial manner. It is not the intention of this paper, therefore, to look into post-2007 developments in which much complex events had unfolded. I believe that this part deserves a special treatment in another paper- possibly when all the dust settles down. (While this paper was being processed to be sent for publication, we heard that the regional council has made a decision to grant a special Woreda/district for the Qemant).

Their geographical location and linguistic-cultural characteristics suggest they were part of a contiguous Agaw-speaking region in the north-west who began to develop their identity since their first extensive contacts with the Ethiopian state in the early fourteenth century (Quirin: 1998, 203).

A controversy exists concerning their origin. One of the noted traditional writers, *AleqaTayye*, argues that the Qemant trace their origin from the Biblical Canaan (*AleqaTayye*: 1955, 241-249). Qemant oral tradition also supports this view (Tinbitu: 2005 E.C., 24-25). According to such tradition, the founder of the Qemant was a man called Anayer (Ayner according to *AleqaTayye*), who is said to have been a grandson of Canaan, son of Ham, son of Noah. Because of severe drought and famine in his country, Anayer is said to have come to Ethiopia with his wife, Entela, and settled in the forests of Kerker. This tradition, though it is strong among the people, needs to be questioned as many of their religious, linguistic and occupational aspects are similar with some of their neighbors, particularly with those who had Agaw origin. The second view, as mentioned above, states that the Qemant were Agaw in origin who maintained their dying identity from centuries-old pressure by the Christian state and the dominant society neighboring them. Scholars who support this perspective suggest that the Qemant were originally part of the common Agaw-speaking people of the region who emerged as distinct groups only gradually over the centuries (Levine: 2000, 39; Tinbitu, 23; Simoons: 1960, 23). This might sound true. This is because much of the northern and central parts of Ethiopia have been inhabited by the Agaw people since pre-Axumite times. In this regard, Edward Ullendorff, in his discussion on peopling of the Axumite civilization, has this to say: "The substrate population par excellence are the Agaw, who inhabit the northern and central Abyssinian plateau" (Ullendorff: 1965, 39). Over the centuries, they underwent a process of acculturation of varying degrees with the Semitic peoples and the Christian state, which consequently brought about the formation of different Agaw enclaves over a wider space from Eritrea in the north to Gojjam and Shewa in the south. One of these enclaves is believed to be the Qemant of today's North Gondar localities.

It has been argued that throughout the centuries, Ethiopian society has been a rich conglomeration of different peoples (Taddese: 1998, 192; 1988, 121-154). The Qemant must have been among those groups who had for long exhibited various types of interaction and integration with whom they came into contact. Such contact often led to the assimilation of smaller groups into the socio-economic, cultural and political arrangements of the state and larger society. The Qemant case seems to be an example. But, we are not definitely sure when exactly the Qemant became a separate group from the rest of the Agaw stock.

There seems also to happen some sort of unanimity among writers themselves in dealing with the religion of the Qemant. They variously refer to it as 'pagan' (Simoons, 23), 'Pagan-Hebraic' (Gamst: 1969, ii), 'Judaic-animist' (Irma: 2005, 35), Deist (Gobat: 1851, 469). Quirin writes often by quoting other sources saying that it is 'bastard creed' constituting Moslem, Christian and Jewish elements (Zelalem: 2003, 47-48). Hormuzd Rassam, the British consul to the court of Emperor Tewodros II in the second half of the 19th century also says, "their religion is as great a mystery in Abyssinia as that of the Ansaries is in Syria, and....they still continue to practice certain rites and ceremonies unknown to either Christians or Mussulmans" (Rassam: 1869, 209). A closer look into their religion still suggests the influence of Jewish, Christian and indigenous religious elements.

Though they are at variance in describing Qemant religion, most of the aforementioned writers unanimously assert that religion was significant for the people to maintain their identity for centuries prior to their assimilation into the dominant Christian-Amhara society (Simoons, 39; Ullendorff: 1960, 38-39).

As for their language, many who have researched about the people argue that the Qemant speak a Cushitic language of Agaw family (Gamst: 1967, 21; Appleyard: 1975, 316; Savard: 1970, 138). The language is variously labeled as Qemantney, Qemant and Qemantgna (the last by the Amhara) and the first seems to be the correct naming which the Qemant themselves agree (Informants A and B).

The Qemant have a politico-religious leader called *wember*, which scholars are not sure whether it was a traditional Qemant institution or a later imposition by the state (Zelalem, 30; Quirin, 204). Etymology of the term, *wember*, however, suggests that it has significance in Amharic language. The *wember* is the highest political and religious leader of Qemant society.

In the economic aspect, the Qemant do not have significant variation with that of the neighboring Amhara. Those Qemant who live in the rural areas are mainly agriculturalists. The tools they use, the crops they produce, the animals they rear are all similar with that of their neighbors. Those who live in the towns are either traders, government employees, or engaged in some other private businesses (Ibid.; Belay: 2010, 9).

Qemant Integration

It is evident that peoples' history is largely determined or shaped by a framework of opportunities and constraints available to them in space and time. In the historical interaction of small groups like the Qemant within a larger state and social formation, the context of constraints and opportunities changes over time, as do their choices and actions (Quirin, 195). Based on this general understanding, Qemant integration history can roughly be divided into three broad periods: the first from their ancient past (most importantly, however, focusing from the early 14th century) to the establishment of Gondar in 1636 as the royal capital for the wandering state in the middle of Qemant land during which initial first hand contact took place between them and the Christian state and society; the second from 1636 to the 1950s in which a gradual, but meaningful change occurred among the Qemant; and the third period from the 1950s to the first decade of the 21st century, a period when Qemant survival as a group fell under serious challenge. From 2007 on, organized movement is on the move by the Qemant intending to revive their identity. This, to some extent, seems to be successful because a special Qemant woreda in the zone (almost exclusively in Chilga and Lay Armachihoworedas and some few in the adjacent woredas) has been declared now by the regional council as Qemant territory. But as stated at the beginning of this article, the post-2007 story is not part of this paper.

The Qemant up to 1636

As stated earlier, though the origin and early history of the Qemant is still shrouded by lacunae, a thorough investigation of their language, religion and other ways of life reveal that the Qemant have been originally part of the common Agaw-speaking population of the region who emerged as distinct groups only gradually over the centuries (Ibid.; Zelalem, 412; Quirin). Their separate identity is the result of a long period of interaction between the Semitic and Cushitic speaking peoples of the region beginning in the pre-Axumite times and continuing in the later centuries as well (Ibid.).

We do not often find details about the historical development that the Qemant had gone through in the period under consideration. Zelalem (a linguist) and Gamst (an anthropologist) argue that it was in the late 13th century (by the end of the Zagwe period) that Christianity and Amharization began to be felt in the Qemant inhabited areas (Zelalem: 54; Gamst, 116). The former in particular maintains that by about A.D. 1268, Christian churches were already built in the Qemant land and thus initial first hand contact between the Qemant and Amhara started beginning from this date (Zelalem, 54-55). As for Tadesse and Quirin, however, such developments were characteristics of the fourteenth and later centuries (Tadesse: 1972, 20; Quirin, 204).

In this regard, the views of the latter appear more convincing because it was during the reigns of King AmdeTseyon (r.1314-1344) and his successors (King Yisihak in particular, who reigned from 1413 to 1430) that expansion of the Christian church and subsequent Amharization in the Northwest flourished. It is to be noted that extension of direct Christian state power to the north-west area between Lake Tana and the Takkaze River happened in the later centuries. Especially it was true after the center of the Christian state shifted from Shewa to the northwestern provinces in the 16th century.

But this does not exactly prove the time when the Qemant became subordinate to the Christian state and its subsequent cultural hegemony. Of course, we have evidences of the Christian state's expansion into this region in the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries. However, it is certain that it was well before the 17th century, prior to Gondar's splendor as a fixed capital in the heart of Qemant inhabited territory that such a process had begun (Gamst, 117).

In the course of the Christian state's incursions into the region, the Qemant chose to accommodate with the prevailing new development (Quirin, 204). Unlike the Bete Israel who chose a

different course, the Qemant were not forced to convert or they did not disperse to other scattered enclaves. They appeared to protect their religion and maintain control over their own land by peacefully paying tribute to the state. This has been confirmed by local memories which suggest that the Qemant were more worried about the Bete Israel attacks than about the Ethiopian kingdom (Ibid).

As a result of some non-violent understanding of the existing milieu, the Qemant remained as rural agriculturalists and kept control over their own *rist* ("inherited") land use rights in the region between Kerker and Chilga (Ibid).

Qemant relations with the state could also be illustrated by functional analysis of institutions of *wember*, the title of the Qemant political-religious elites. Traditionally, there were two chief *wembers*, one in Kerker and the other in Chilga (Ibid).

The genealogical descent of both branches traces back to the seventeen and eighteen generations respectively, putting their origins in the pre-Gondar period. Though the Qemant assert the term *wember* was originally a Qemant word (Informant A), it is also common in Amharic (meaning, "seat", hence, "judge"). It would appear that as the Christian state moved into the region of what became Gondar, the Qemant who submitted peacefully seemed to have maintained the rule of their pre-existing leader known as *wember* ratified, or the *wember* was a direct appointment by the state (Quirin, 204). In any case, this helped the preservation of the significance of *wember* among the Qemant which escaped total decay in the well-established political institution of the dominant groups till our times.

The Qemant during that time became partially incorporated groups into the rural peasant class, but under the larger society. At the same time, they also withdrew and maintained their own beliefs and practices, "albeit influenced by 'Judaic' ayhud-Falasha and by Orthodox Christians" (Ibid).

The Qemant from 1636 to the late 1950s

The establishment of Gondar in 1636 as a permanent capital had massive impact on Ethiopian socio-political structure and relations among its peoples and classes. It brought people of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds together (Ibid; Nega, 40-43). The Qemant, like other people, were at this period incorporated more closely to the institutional structure of the state and the dominant society than before. They brought their agricultural products and fire wood to the city (Quirin, 207; Solomon; Nega). They played roles in Gondar, though, as rural agriculturalists, they remained rather peripheral to the city. Those who worked in the city were manual laborers, construction workers, servants, soldiers and guards. "But their main job was to bring to town the heavy wooden beams, and probably also the stones and sand used in constructing the Gondar castles." (Quirin).

There are traditions which associate the etymology of the word Gondar with Qemant language. One of these ascribes the origin of the name to the Qemant-Agaw word "Guang Dara" which means "between two rivers" - the two rivers being Qeha and Angereb. The other somewhat similar, also had a linguistic basis. It made the name "Gondar" an outcome of a combination of two Qemant and Amharic words, "gwand" and "der" respectively. While "gwand" stood for ditch, well or precipice in the Agaw language, "der" meant edge or limit in Amharic. This, therefore, portrayed Gondar as a land situated on the edge of a precipice, ditch or well (Solomon, 2). Whether the word Gondar is exclusively a Qemant word or partly related with it, it anyhow demonstrates the significance of Qemant language by then in and around Gondar that became the country's third permanent capital, only next to Axum and Lalibela.

This anal of the Qemant is one of the poorly sourced episodes. Travelers and missionaries of this period were more interested in documenting about Bete Israel than the Qemant. We therefore depend on very few fragmentary sources to reconstruct their history.

The position of Christian kings towards Qemant was isolationist. Quirin states that imperial policy was proclaimed to keep them out skirted from the Christian population. And as to traditions which he cited, the Qemant were not allowed to live or stay overnight within the borders of Gondar, but had to live in Kerker. Thus these segregationist policies, he argues, confirmed pre-existing divisions (Zelalem, 48; Nega, 45). Nega's (p. 45) interviewees told him that the Qemant by then were pressurized to convert to Christianity by being remarked.

“Qemantqemantbilutaykoche [He who does not mind for being called qemant Ginbarunmeskelyalgechew the Cross has not touched his forehead Fituntebelyalterechew:] nor has the holy water washed his face]

This is an indication that being Qemant and not getting converted to Christianity was a shame during that time (Nega, 45).

Zelalem also argues that the Qemant religion and its followers have been scorned and laughed at, which has led to fear and shame among the people. As to him, they have been considered as followers of a “strange and mysterious religion”, as well as “worshippers of wood” (Ibid). According to the early 19th century missionary Samuel Gobat, their Amharic-speaking neighbors considered the Qemant “*boudas*, or sorcerers, along with the Bete Israel, most Mussulmans (Muslims), and some Christians” (Gobat, 263). Gobat knew little more about this “small Pagan people inhabiting the mountains in the vicinity of Gondar”. Stern also suggests that the Qemant during this time were “...very much despised and misrepresented.” (Stern, 43).

In another note, Stern mentions that Tewodros (r. 1855-1868) was wise in not trying to force the Qemant to accept Christianity- though he initially had planned so. Stern wrote: Tewodros attempted to convert the Kamant to Christianity, but when, in a Grand Council, the plan was proposed, several chiefs reminded his majesty that if that scheme were carried out, the Kamants might become proud, and bring no more fuel to Gondar, and this being a matter of such very grave importance, the project was at once abandoned, and the poor people were saved by their toil and activity from persecution or the acceptance of a hated and idolatrous creed.” (Ibid, 44-45).

Another cultural practice which potentially eroded the identity of the Qemantas of this period, according to the sources, was the piercing of women’s ear wide and large to hold up big wooden ear rings. This tradition, which was common among the Qemant women as recently as the reign of Emperor Haile Silassie I (1930-1974), is believed to have been started during the seventeenth century when the then king became infatuated with the wife of *Azazh Chiwsa* (chief of the Qemant) and wanted to have an affair with her. Chiwsa was ordered to take her to the king. He reported that the lady was going through her cycle. Knowing that he would have to take her one day, he pierced her ears so that she would smell bad from the infection. When he took her later, the king dismissed her because of the smell from her ears. From that time onwards, Qemant women started piercing their ears and wearing large wooden ear rings (Zelalem, 34-37; Quirin, 209-217; Nega, 42).

Both Qemant oral tradition and other sources claim that in the nineteenth century, the Chilga region became economically and politically more significant on the national level as Tewodros rose to imperial power and the trade route between Gondar and the Sudan increased in importance. (Dessalegn: 2010, 6; Stern, Winstantley) The route from Gondar to Matamma passed through several Qemant market centers, especially those of Chilga (Aykel), Negade Bahir and Wahn, about 60 miles from Matamma. (Quirin, 215).

During this time, many Qemant were converted to Christianity not out of true conviction but because they wanted to advance their military/political carriers. Because of their loyalty and services, the emperor was believed to have followed an integrationist policy towards them (Ibid, 216; Bruce, 275-276; Klein: 2007).

At any rate, the Qemant who wanted to take part in the broader society followed a strategy of outward submission and inward withdrawal. Such a strategy was pursued by minority who wanted a political-military position, but most Qemant continued to maintain a degree of separation by practicing their own religion, by washing themselves after they came into contact with Christians and by eating only meat which they slaughtered themselves (Ibid, 217; Gamst, 119). This shows that most Qemant were reluctant to convert, though they did not want to avoid the benefits afforded to them by approaching the state and dominant society.

In terms of language, there seems to have happened widespread acculturation. On his way to imperial Gondar, the missionary Henry Aaron Stern had passed through Chilga, one of the Qemant dominated areas. He witnessed that the language the Qemant spoke by then was Amharic “...., but amongst themselves they speak in the Falasha tongue.” (Stern, 44). Though they share some striking features with the Falashas, Stern’s report which assigns to the Qemant a Jewish origin and labeling

their language Falasha, might be misleading. He observed that many of the Qemant women daily came to Gondar to sell wood (Ibid, 43). There seems a gendered role difference by this time as most men stopped bringing wood and other construction materials as a result of the decline of construction activity in the city since the second half of the 18th century.

The last decades of the 19th century marked the mass Christianization of the Qemant under economic motives. During the reign of Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1889), the Qemant became vulnerable to forced conversion because of their lack of an autonomous means of livelihood. (Gamst) The emperor was said to have issued several edicts stating that various non-Christians had to convert. With regard to the Qemant, the edicts meant that they had to convert or lose their right to *rist* land. In Kerker, the collection of *Gult* (tributary) payments for those Qemant who converted was lifted. As a result of such moves, many more Qemant were converted to Christianity. (Ibid, 119-120; Nega, 46-47). This period of forceful conversion has gone in Qemant terminology as “Yizimgirga” which means ‘kifu ken’ or bad/evil days (Ibid).

But this stayed only for a short period as Yohannes died in 1889, and subsequently the political power shifted to the south during the reign of Emperor Menelik II (1889-1913). The new emperor was said to have been liberal and did not pursue forced conversion. (Ibid) Also the Mahadists destroyed Christian churches in communities of the Qemant area in Gondar, which relaxed the effort and attention of the king to convert the Qemant (Ibid, 121). Hence, the Qemant, who had been converted and drawn into the institutional structure of the state, now returned to their religion and way of life.

During the five years of Italian Occupation of Ethiopia (1936-41), the Italians followed a divide and rule policy. In this connection, in addition to their pro-Muslim attitude, the Italians tried to play the Qemants of Gondar and its vicinity off against the Amhara. The Italians invented a history for the Qemant, which has similarity with that of Romulus and Remus, the legendary twin brothers who founded Rome. According to this story, the forefather of the Qemants, Aynar, was brought up by a sas (antelope) which suckled him. The Italians also prepared a separate flag with an insignia of a sas under a fig tree for the Qemant. This had, to some extent, succeeded in igniting the Qemant of Chilga in particular to self-awaken themselves (Gerima: 1949 E.C., 29-30).

After the Italian occupation, the Ethiopian Orthodox church started a program of enforced Amharization, i.e. conversion to Christianity and adopting Amhara ways of life. The ultimate aim was to unify diverse Ethiopia. This became so swift especially after the second half of the century that almost all the youth have identified themselves as Amhara (Zelalem, 56-59; Dawit: 2010, 97-99).

The Qemant after the late 1950s

This is a period that marked Qemant survival as group coming under serious challenge. For this to happen, a number of factors were at work (which we shall see below).

One of these factors was the 1958/9 mass conversion of the Qemant to Christianity. This was mainly carried out by a certain *Abba Layke* Mariam Biru, under the auspices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The Christian Qemant who had position in the church and in the government also contributed a lot in the course. As a result of this, not only indigenous religious but also linguistic and ethnic decay occurred among the Qemant, who became absorbed in the social, religious and political anatomy of the state (Ibid, 37-38; Nega, 47-49).

Another factor which facilitated Qemant incorporation into the Amhara way of life was the introduction of modern education. Since the opening of the first primary school, which was founded at Serabain 1961, a number of schools have been established as deep as in the rural part of the Qemant settlement. In these schools, the medium of instruction was Amharic and the teachers were mostly Christian Amhara or Amharic-speaking Christian Qemant (Ibid, 35-36; Dessalegn, 6). This then contributed for a further disintegration of Qemant identity.

Further integration was made by stretching the transport route in and around the Qemant sphere of influence. The building of a new and modern road along the old route was made in 1962 between Gondar and Matamma which attracted the Qemant into the Amhara. It covers about 200 kilometers, of which 166 kilometers lie in Qemant land. Ethiopian Highways Authority camps were built at Qemant-dominated spots of Bohna, Aykel (Chilga), Seraba, and Negade Bahir. The Qemant participated in the

construction of this road and they began to move from place to place by bus. This intensified contact between them and the Amhara to further intensify their assimilation into the Amhara ways of life (Ibid, 39).

Intermarriage also became a common practice between the Qemant and the Amhara (Ibid, 42). Its material use for political ends seems also to be well understood by the state itself (as was the case in the past). Elderly Qemant persons told Zelalem about a story that happened when Emperor Haile Selassie visited Gondar in 1959. The Emperor was informed about the different religion that the Qemant people were following. After patiently listening to the report, he said to the governors "why don't you 'eliminate' them?" The governors interpreted his response wrongly as though he wanted the Qemant people to be eliminated in the real sense of the term. One of them said to the king, 'Oh! It is a matter of giving an assignment to a small group of soldiers to put an end to them'. The Emperor's retributive remark was this: 'when I said eliminate them, I did not mean that you should kill them, but reduce their number through intermarriage'(Ibid). His message was that they should be integrated through marriage.

In connection with this, Gamstin 1969 had correctly forecasted the would-be future of the Qemant. He then stated, 'since the Qemant are compelled to marry Christian neighbors in order to avoid what they considered to be incestuous marriages that bring on supernatural sanctions, the end of the Qemant society seems imminent.' (Gamst, 122). And within a matter of two or three decades, his scholastic insights have come true. A recent socio-linguistic survey notes that the Qemant religion is in a very precarious situation since very few people adhere to it. According to this study, the ratio of those who follow the Qemant religion to those who are baptized and converted to Christianity is about 1% to 99% (Zelalem, 31; CSA 1998, 35). Also the present national census conducted in 2007(CSA: 2007;Tinbitu, 58-61) does not include the Qemant as an ethnic group, who numbered 163,936 and 172,291 in the 1984(CSA: 1984, 32) and 1994(CSA: 1994, 35) censuses, respectively.

Therefore, it appears that the Qemant, after centuries of contact with the state and dominant society neighboring them, have finally fully integrated, that compromised their indigenous religious, linguistic, socio-political as well as ethnic roots. In fact, this is not unique only to the Qemant. As the famous scholar of Ethiopian history, Tadesse Tamrat argues Many ethnic groups cited in very authentic documents over the centuries have gradually and imperceptibly disappeared from the historical scene. Others, who clearly had separate and viable communities of their own in some periods, are seen entering a new cultural and political milieu into which they simply merge over the years, thus forging a new identity in keeping with the relations they establish with their surroundings.(Taddese,1988:121)

This total or partial integration of linguistic, religious and ethnic groups has been one of the common themes of world history. The Qemant, as highlighted in the previous pages, had gone through a long period of interaction and integration, the result of which has eroded much of what they believe are elements of their identity.

The events of the last couple of years have clearly shown that the Qemant chapter has not been closed completely, i.e., in dramatic and worrisome circumstances, the Qemant have succeeded in getting about 72 kebeles in Chilga, Matamma, Lay Armachihoworedas of the zone under Qemant administration. And, unless all parties involved i.e. the Qemant, Amhara, and most importantly, the government (both federal, regional and local) take precautions and arrive at meaningful and win-win solutions, the Qemant issue might continue unresolved.

Conclusion

Even though the Qemant might have had a long period of interaction with other groups, the interaction and integration of them with the Christian state and the Amhara could probably take shape with the expansion of the Christian state into the Northwest in the late 13th or early 14th centuries.

The origin and early history of the Qemantare obscure. But, as of the late 13th or early 14th centuries, they began to be drawn into the institutional structure of the state and thus became vulnerable for subsequent Christianization and Amharization.

This paper argues that interaction led to the formation of a unique identity at some stage of their history, but at the same time this interaction, when it became deep and consistent, has also brought about the loss of this identity in the later period of the history of the Qemant.

Especially in the period after 1636, the Qemant were gradually integrated and in the half century after the 1950s, they were totally integrated into the Amhara ways of life that today only a very few section of them are considering itself as Qemant.

Today, the Qemant are for all practical purposes indistinguishable from their Amhara neighbors. Almost all of them speak Amharic, and the names of even those who speak only Qemant are completely Amharized. Only a very tiny fraction of the elderly adhere to the Qemant religion (*higelibona*) and speak Qemantney language.

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Profile of Key Informants*

Number	Age	Place of Interview	Occupation
A	75	Seraba	Farmer
B	65	Aykel	Local Drink Seller
C	79	Seraqo	Qemant Priest
D	85	Aykel	Merchant
E	80	Nara Awudarda	Farmer
F	82	TikilDingay	Retired

*The researcher has omitted the names of key informants for security reasons and confidentiality.